

Message Text

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ACTION EA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 PM-03 NSC-05 SP-02 SS-15 CIAE-00 INR-07

NSAE-00 SY-05 PRS-01 OPR-02 SSO-00 /051 W

----- 072411

P R 241116Z MAR 75

FM AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9954

INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY SAIGON

CINCPAC HONOLULU HI

USSAG NKP THAI

DIA WASHDC

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 PHNOM PENH 5368

NOFORN

E.O.11652: GDS

TAGS: MOPS PINR CB

SUBJECT: KC SITUATION IN WEST/NORTHWEST SECTOR OF PHNOM PENH

1. SUMMARY. THE DEFENSE ATTACHE OFFICE IN PHNOM PENH HAS JUST FILED A REPORT INDICATING THAT THE KC HAVE NOW COMMITTED ALL SIGNIFICANT FORCES REMAINING IN THE WEST/NORTHWEST SECTOR OF THE CITY AND THAT STRENGTH LEVELS IN THE KC 3RD AND PARTICULARLY THE 1ST DIVISION IN THAT AREA MAY WELL BE SIGNIFICANTLY BELOW THE FIGURES IN GENERAL CIRCULATION WITHIN THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY. THIS MESSAGE IS BASED ON THAT REPORT AND FURNISHES EMBASSY COMMENT. END SUMMARY.

2. BOTH PRESS REPORTING AND OUR OWN HAVE FOCUSED WIDELY ON THE WEAKNESSES AND FAILINGS OF FANK UNITS DEPLOYED AROUND PHNOM PENH, THEIR HIGH CASUALTY LOSSES AND DESERTION RATES, PROBLEMS OF LEADERSHIP AND MORALE, AND GENERAL SLUGGISHNESS ON BOTH OFFENSE AND DEFENSE. OUR PICTURE OF THE EFFECT OF 11 TO 12 WEEKS OF HEAVY FIGHTING ON THE KC MILITARY STRUCTURE HAS BEEN MUCH HAZIER, AND OUR OWN PROJECTIONS OF KC CASUALTIES HAVE OFTEN BEEN MET WITH

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SKEPTICISM RANGING TO DERISION, AT LEAST BY THE PRESS.

3. A DAO INTELLIGENCE REPORT SENT TO DIA WASHINGTON ON 22 MARCH, THROUGH CHANNELS NOT DIRECTLY AVAILABLE TO THE DEPARTMENT, SHEDS CONSIDERABLY MORE LIGHT ON THE KC SIDE OF THE EQUATION. THIS IS A PARAPHRASE OF THE DAO MESSAGE FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE DEPARTMENT, ALTHOUGH THE CONCLUSIONS ARE LARGELY OUR OWN. COMMENT BY OTHER MEMBERS OF THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY WOULD OF COURSE BE WELCOMED.

3. AS ONE SWINGS AN ARC COUNTERCLOCKWISE NORTH OF THE CITY FROM THE WEST BANK OF THE TONLE SAP RIVER AND HIGHWAY 5 TOWARDS THE WEST, THEN SOUTHWEST, THEN SOUTH UNTIL ONE CROSSES HIGHWAY 4, AND THEN CONTINUES THE ARC BY TURNING BACK TOWARDS THE SOUTHEAST, ONE ENCOMPASSES THE AREA OF HEAVIEST FIGHTING AROUND THE CITY DURING THE DRY SEASON, AND THE AREA OF GREATEST THREAT TO HZHE OBVIOUS ENEMY OBJECTIVES OF 1) THE AIRPORT, 2) THE KANTAUK AMMUNITION DUMP AND 3) THE CITY ITSELF. THE FIRST PART OF THIS ARC WEST FROM THE RIVER, PITS 3 REGIMENTS OF THE KC NORTHERN REGION PLUS ONE KC SPECIAL REGION BRIGADE AGAINST THE GALLANT, BUT EXTREMELY THIN AND RIDDLED FANK 7TH DIVISION, AND THE ATTACHED 5TH AND 38TH BRIGADES. INDEPENDENT INTELLIGENCE INDICATES THAT THE 3 KC NORTHERN REGION REGIMENTS HAVE ALSO BEEN BADLY DEPLETED AND THAT THEY ARE IN URGENT NEED OF REINFORCEMENTS. FURTHERMORE, THE INABILITY OF THESE FORCES TO CAPITALIZE SERIOUSLY ON OCCASIONAL GAPING HOLES IN FANK 7TH DIVSION LINES, AND TO OVERRUN SOME OF THE MORE THINLY HELD FANK POSITIONS, CERTAINLY ARGUES FOR A CONSIDERABLE DEGRADATION IN COMBAT EFFECTIVENESS OF THESE KC UNITS.

4. MOVING ALONG ON THE ARC DESCRIBED ABOVE, ONE FINDS, IN COUNTERCLOCKWISE ORDER, THE 1ST, 3RD AND 2ND DIVISIONS OF THE KC SOUTHWEST REGION, WITH THE LAST, THE 2ND DIVISION, LYING WHOLLY SOUTH OF HIGHWAY 4. IT HAD BEEN THE VIEW OF DAO AND THE EMBASSY IN THE EARLY WEEKS OF THE OFFENSIVE THAT THE PRINCIPAL THREAT TO THE AIRPORT, AMMUNITION DUMPT AND ULTIMATELY PHNOM PENH, CAME FROM THE KC 1ST AND 3RD DIVISIONS IN THIS SECTOR. THESE APPEARED TO BE ONLY LIGHTLY COMMITTED (ALTHOUGH MORE HEAVILY AT TIMES),

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WITH CONSIDERABLE ELEMENTS HELD IN RESERVE TO THE WEST AND NORTHWEST, WAITING TO EXPLOIT THE OPPORTUNITIES THAT SEEMED LIKELY TO ARISE AS THE OPPPOSING FANK UNITS WERE GRADUALLY GROUNDED DOWN.

5. NEVERTHELESS, IN RECENT WEEKS THESE KC DIVISIONS HAVE PRESENTED GROWING EVIDENCE OF AN INABILITY TO EXPLIT VERY REAL AND OBVIOUS OPPORTUNITIES. TWO OR

THREE WEEKS AGO CERTAIN FANK UNITS LEFT THEIR POSITIONS BETWEEN ROUTE 4 AND THE KEY TOWN OF TUOL LEAP AND RETURNED TO KOMPONG SPEU, LEAVING A 1.5 KILOMETER GAP FOR TWO OR THREE DAYS IN FANK LINES. LATER WHEN THE KC TOOK TUOL LEAP, A MAJOR BREACH WAS LEFT IN FANK LINES WHICH THE ENEMY FAILED TO EXPLOIT. FURTHERMORE, THE ENEMY WERE SUFFERING MOUNTING CASUALTIES FROM AIR AND ARTILLERY STRIKES THROUGHOUT THEIR AREAS.

6. ON 21 MARCH FANK CAPTURED A KC SQUAD LEADER FROM THE 121ST BATTALION, 15TH REGIMENT, OF THE KC FIRST DIVISION, WHO IN INTERROGATION CONFIRMED AND REINFORCED MUCH OF DAO'S THINKING ABOUT THE LOCATION AND CONDITION OF THESE MAJOR KC UNITS. FIRST OF ALL, THE KC FIRST DIVISION HAD RECENTLY BEEN MOVED SOUTH INTO THE TUOL LEAP AREA TO HELP THE 3RD DIVISION, WHOSE SINGLE RESPONSIBILITY HAD COVERED TUOL LEAP. OBVIOUSLY, THE 3RD DIVISION HAD BEEN PREVIOUSLY HURT BADLY ENOUGH TO REQUIRE SUCH REINFORCEMENT. BUT EVEN MORE SIGNIFICANTLY, THIS MEANT THAT THE KC HAD COMMITTED ALL THEIR RESERVES IN THE WEST/NORTHWEST SECTOR.

7. WITHOUT GETTING INTO TOO MUCH DETAILED ORDER OF BATTLE INFORMATION HERE, THE PRISONER STATED THAT HIS REGIMENT HAD ABSORBED HEAVY CASUALTIES THROUGHOUT THE CURRENT DRY SEASON OFFENSIVE, AND THAT, WHEREAS PERSONNEL REPLACEMENTS FOR COMBAT LOSSES WERE READILY AVAILABLE DURING THE EARLY PART OF THE DRY SEASON, THE NUMBERS AND FREQUENCY OF REPLACEMENTS HAD DIMINISHED SIGNIFICANTLY IN RECENT WEEKS. HE ESTIMATED THE CURRENT STRENGTH OF HIS REGIMENT AT 400 PERSONS; DAO HAD RECKONED IT AT 1200 AT THE BEGINNING OF THE DRY SEASON OFFENSIVE. A KC RALLIER IN EARLY JANUARY HAD PLACED IT

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AT 1400 (4 BATTALIONS OF 350 MEN EACH).

8. IF ONE WERE TO EXTEND THIS RATION BY ANALOGY TO THE REMAINING TWO REGULAR REGIMENTS OF THE DIVISION (REGIMENTS 16 AND 17), ONE WOULD HAVE A DIVISION STRENGTH OF AROUND 1200, AGAINST AN INITIAL 3600 TO 4,000. THERE IS SOME INDICATION THAT A FOURTH REGIMENT (REGIMENT 18)

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IS AT LEAST FOR THIS OPERATION UNDER THE OPERATIONAL
CONTROL OF THE FIRST DIVISION, SO THAT THE TOTALS
MIGHT BE 1600 REMAINING OUT OF AN INITIAL 4800-5600.

9. COMMENT: THIS IS NOT INTENDED AS A LIGHT AT THE END
OF THE TUNNEL MESSAGE. HOWEVER, IT DOES SEEM POSSIBLE,
PERHAPS EVEN PROBABLE, NOT ONLY THAT THE MOST IMPORTANT KC
ELEMENTS IN ASSESSING THE GROUND THREAT TO THE AIRPORT
AND MAJOR APPROACHES TO THE CITY ARE ENTIRELY
COMMITTED NOW WITHOUT A SIGNIFICANT STRATEGIC RESERVE,
BUT THAT THEIR EFFECTIVE STRENGTHS ARE WELL BELOW THOSE
PREVIOUSLY CREDITED TO THEM BY THE INTELLIGENCE
COMMUNITY. IT MAY BE REMEMBERED THAT THE KC SECOND
DIDIVISION, SOUTH OF HIGHWAY 4, HAS BEEN RATHER SEVERELY
MANHANDLED BY THE FANK THIRD DIVISION ON SEVERAL RECENT
OCCASIONS, TO THE POINT THWERE IT HAS SHOWN CONSIDERABLY
LESS OFFENSIVE CAPABILITY IN RECENT WEEKS THAN THE
CORRESPONDING KC (SOUTHWEST REGION) FIRST AND THIRD
DIVISIONS NORTH OF HIGHWAY 4. IN SHORT, MAKING ALLOWANCES
FOR THE WELL KNOWN AND WIDELY PUBLICIZED DEFICIENCIES
AND PROBLEM AREAS OF FANK, ONE ARRIVES AT THE PICTURE

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OF THE PROVERBAL TWO PUNCH DRUNK FIGHTERS STAGGERING
AROUND THE RING, NEITHER OF WHICH APPEARS TO HAVE ENOUGH

POWER LEFT TO PUSH THE OTHER OVER ON HIS FACE. THE TRUE STRENGTH AND CAPABILITIES OF THESE KC UNITS BEAR MOST DIRECTLY ON THE ABILITY OF FANK TO GET THROUGH THE DRY SEASON, ASSUMING A REASONABLE LEVEL OF SUPPLY.

10. TWO OTHER FACTORS TO BE CONSIDERED SHOULD BE MENTIONED HERE. THE FIRST RELATES TO THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE POSSIBLE FALL OF NEAK LUONG, THE GKR'S SOLE REMAINING POSITION ON THE EAST BANK OF THE LOWER MEKONG. AS OTHER FANK POSITIONS ON THE WEST BANK OF THE MEKONG HAVE FALLEN IN RECENT WEEKS, THE KC HAVE BEGUN TO DEPLOY THE ENTIRE 12TH KC BRIGADE (ONE REGIMENT OF THE KC (EASTERN REGION)'S FIRST DIVISION WAS RELOCATED TO THIS AREA IN EARLY FEB) NORTH TO FACE THE FANK 2ND DIVISION IN THE BASSAC CORRIDOR SOUTHEAST OF THE CITY. THIS IN TURN HAS ALLOWED THE KC 11TH BRIGADE TO BEGIN RELOCATING FORCES WESTWARD TO THE SECTOR OF FANK'S FIRST DIVISION, SOUTH OF THE CITY. NEITHER OF THESE SHIFTS HAVE SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASED THE THREAT IN THOSE AREAS. HOWEVER, SHOULD NEAK LUONG FALL, THE REMAINING TWO REGIMENTS OF THE KC FIRST (EASTERN REGION) DIVISION, AS WELL AS FIVE REGIMENTS OF THE KC (EASTERN REGION)) SECOND DIVISION NOW ON THE EAST BANK, WOULD THEN BECOME AVAILABLE TO MOVE NORTH FOR ACTION ON THE CITY'S SOUTH, SOUTHEAST, OR EASTERN PERIMETERS (THE LATTER ACROSS THE MEKONG). THIS WOULD INTRODUCE A NEW AND DISTURBING FACTOR INTO THE DEFENSE EQUATION THAT MIGHT, AT THE LEAST, FORCE SOME REDEPLOYMENT OF FANK FORCES WITHIN THE OVERALL PERIMETER.

11. THE SECOND RELATES TO THE PROBLEM OF REPLACEMENTS. WHILE, AS MENTIONED ABOVE, THE ENEMY IS DEFINITELY FEELING A SERIOUS MANPOWER PINCH AT THIS TIME, AND WHILE HE HAS UNDOUBTEDLY TAKEN FAR HIGHER CASUALTIES THAN HAS FANK, STILL HIS MORE AUTHORITARIAN, PERHAPS AT TIMES EVEN BRUTAL, RECRUITING PRACTICES ARE ON THE WHOLE MORE EFFICIENT THAN THE MORE HAPHAZARD, SOMETIMES GRAFT-RIDDEN, SYSTEM EMPLOYED BY THE GKR. IT HAS BEEN OUR ESTIMATE THAT FANK RECRUITING HAS SO FAR KEPT PACE WITH TOTAL CASUALTIES,

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BUT NOT WITH CASUALTIES PLUS DESERTIONS. ONE MIGHT ASSUME THAT THE ENEMY'S DESERTION RATE IS LOWER (THE PENALTY BEING CORRESPONDINGLY GREATER IF ONE IS CAUGHT), AND THAT PROPORTIONALLY TO HIS POPULATION BASE HIS RECRUITING EFFORTS ARE MORE PRODUCTIVE. IN ADDITION, HE IS KNOWN TO BE USING FEMALE COMBATANTS AS WELL AS SUPPORT TROOPS IN PROVINCIAL UNITS, SUCH AS AT KOMPONG THOM AND KOMPONG SOM, WHICH UNDOUBTEDLY ARE DESIGNED TO FREE MORE MALE REPLACEMENTS FOR THE CITY BATTLEFRONT.

12. AS MENTIONED ABOVE, IT MIGHT BE USEFUL IF OTHER
ELEMENTS OF THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY WERE TO OFFER
COMMENTS ON THE ABOVE.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptoning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: COMBAT OPERATIONS, INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENTS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 24 MAR 1975
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: GolinoFR
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1975PHNOM05368
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D750102-0185
From: PHNOM PENH
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1975/newtext/t19750322/aaaaatlc.tel
Line Count: 282
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION EA
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 6
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: GolinoFR
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 08 JUL 2003
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <08 JUL 2003 by ShawDG>; APPROVED <09 JUL 2003 by GolinoFR>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
05 JUL 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: KC SITUATION IN WEST/NORTHWEST SECTOR OF PHNOM PENH
TAGS: MOPS, PINR, CB
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 05 JUL 2006